Charles XII of Sweden

Charles XII, sometimes Carl (Swedish: Karl XII) or Latinized to Carolus Rex (17 June 1682 – 30 November 1718 O.S., was the King of Sweden from 1697 to 1718. He belonged to the House of Palatinate-Zweibrücken, a branch line of the House of Wittelsbach. Charles was the only surviving son of Charles XI and Ulrika Eleonora the Elder. He assumed power, after a seven-month caretaker government, at the age of fifteen.

In 1700, a triple alliance of Denmark–Norway, Saxony–Poland–Lithuania and Russia launched a threefold attack on the Swedish protectorate of Holstein-Gottorp and provinces of Livonia and Ingria, aiming to draw advantage as the Swedish Empire was unaligned and ruled by a young and inexperienced king, thus initiating the Great Northern War. Leading the Swedish army against the alliance Charles won multiple victories despite being usually significantly outnumbered.

Konung Carl den XII
Sällsynda Kläder
när Han Giorde Sitt
Sälltåg Å: 1700.
CARL XII

A major victory over a Russian army some three times the size in 1700 at the Battle of Narva compelled Peter the Great to sue for peace which Charles then rejected. By 1706 Charles, now 24 years old, had forced all of his foes into submission including, in that year, a decisively devastating victory by Swedish forces under general Carl Gustav Rehnskiöld over a combined army of Saxony and Russia at the Battle of Fraustadt. Russia was now the sole remaining hostile power.

Charles was an exceptionally skilled military leader and tactician as well as an able politician, credited with introducing important tax and legal reforms. As for his famous reluctance towards peace efforts, he is quoted by Voltaire as saying upon the outbreak of the war; "I have resolved never to start an unjust war but never to end a legitimate one except by defeating my enemies". With the war consuming more than half his life and nearly all his reign, he never married and fathered no children. He was succeeded by his sister Ulrika Eleonora, who in turn was coerced to hand over all substantial powers to the Riksdag of the Estates and opted to surrender the throne to her husband, who became King Frederick I of Sweden.

Great Northern War

Around 1700, the monarchs of Denmark–Norway, Saxony (ruled by elector August II of Poland, who was also the king of Poland-Lithuania) and Russia united in an alliance against Sweden, largely through the efforts of Johann Reinhold Patkul, a Livonian nobleman who turned traitor when the "great reduction" of Charles XI in 1680 stripped much of the nobility of lands and properties. In late 1699 Charles sent a minor detachment to reinforce his brother-in-law Duke Frederick IV of Holstein-Gottorp, who was attacked by Danish forces the following year. A Saxon army simultaneously invaded Swedish Livonia and in February 1700 surrounded Riga, the most populous city of the Swedish Empire. Russia also declared war (August 1700), but stopped short of an attack on Swedish Ingria until September 1700.

Russia had opened their part of the war by invading the Swedish-held territories of Livonia and Estonia. Charles countered this by attacking the Russian besiegers at the **Battle of Narva (November 1700).** The Russians outnumbered the Swedish army of ten thousand men by almost four to one. Charles attacked under cover of a blizzard, effectively split the Russian army in two and won the battle. Many of Peter's troops who fled the battlefield drowned in the Narva River. The total number of Russian fatalities reached about 10,000 at the end of the battle, while the Swedish forces lost 667 men.

Charles did not pursue the Russian army. Instead, he turned against Poland-Lithuania, which was formally neutral at this point, thereby disregarding Polish negotiation proposals supported by the Swedish parliament. Charles defeated the Polish king Augustus II and his Saxon allies at the Battle of Kliszow in **1702** and captured many cities of the Commonwealth. After the deposition of Augustus as king of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Charles XII put Stanisław Leszczyński as his puppet on the Polish throne **(1704).**

Charles XII and Mazepa at the Dnieper River after Poltava

Russian resurgence

While Charles won several decisive battles in the Commonwealth and ultimately secured the coronation of his ally Stanisław Leszczyński and the surrender of Saxony, the Russian Tsar Peter the Great embarked on a military reform plan that improved the Russian army, using the effectively organized Swedes and other European standards for role models.

By the time of the decisive Battle of Poltava, Charles had been **wounded,** one-third of his infantry was dead, and his supply train was destroyed. The king was incapacitated by a coma resulting from his injuries and was unable to lead the Swedish forces. With the numbers of Charles' army reduced to some 23,000, with several wounded and handling the siege of Poltava, his general Carl Gustav Rehnskiöld had a clearly inferior force to face the fortified and modernized army of Tsar Peter, with some 45,000 men.[16] The Swedish assault ended in disaster, and the king fled with a small entourage south to the Ottoman Empire, where he set up camp at Bender with some 1,000 of his Caroleans ("Karoliner" in Swedish). The remainder of the army surrendered days later at Perevolochna under Lewenhaupt's command, most of them (including Lewenhaupt himself) spending the rest of their days in Russian captivity.

The Swedish defeat at Poltava in 1709 marks the downfall of the Swedish Empire,

Exile in the Ottoman Empire

The Turks initially welcomed the Swedish king, who managed to provoke a war between the Ottomans and the Russians. His expenses during his long stay in the Ottoman Empire were covered by the Ottoman state budget, as part of the fixed assets (Demirbaş in Turkish), hence his nickname Demirbaş Şarl (Fixed Asset Charles) in Turkey. Demirbaş, the Turkish word for fixed asset, is literally ironhead (demir = iron, baş = head), which is the reason why this nickname has often been translated as Ironhead Charles. Eventually a small village named Karlstad had to be built near Bender to accommodate the ever-growing Swedish population there. Sultan Ahmet III, as a gesture to the King, had bought some of the Swedish women and children put up for sale by the Russians and turned them over to the Swedes, thus further strengthening the growing community of Caroleans.

Back to Sweden

Meanwhile, the Swedish Council of State (government) and Estates/Diet (Parliament) tried to keep the beleaguered Sweden somehow organized and independent. **Eventually, in the autumn of 1714**, their warning letter reached him. In it, those executive and legislative bodies told the absentee King that unless he quickly **returned to Sweden**, they would independently conclude an achievable **peace treaty with Russia, Poland and Denmark.** This stark admonition prompted Charles to **rush back to Sweden**

The Battle of Narva on 30 November [O.S. 19 November] 1700 (20 November in the Swedish transitional calendar) was an early battle in the Great Northern War. A Swedish relief army under Charles XII of Sweden defeated a Russian siege force three to four times its size.

Pomerania and Norway

Charles agreed to leave Constantinople and returned to Swedish Pomerania. He made the journey on horseback, riding across Europe in just fifteen days. He traveled across the Habsburg Kingdom of Hungary to Vienna and arrived at Stralsund. A medal with Charles on horseback, his long hair flying in the wind, was struck in **1714** to commemorate the speedy ride.

Charles invaded Norway in 1716 with a combined force of 7,000 men. He occupied the capital of Christiania, (modern Oslo), and laid siege to the Akershus fortress

After **suffering significant losses** of men and materiel, Charles was forced to retreat from the capital on 29 April. In the following mid-May, Charles invaded again, this time striking the border town of Fredrikshald, now Halden, in an attempt to capture the fortress of Fredriksten. The attacking Swedes came under heavy cannon fire from the fortress and were forced to withdraw when the Norwegians set the town of Fredrikshald on fire. Swedish casualties in Fredrikshald were estimated at 500 men. While the siege at Fredrikshald was underway, the Swedish supply fleet was attacked and defeated by Tordenskjold in the Battle of Dynekilen.

After Poltava

The Battle of Poltava (8 July 1709 was the decisive victory of Peter I of Russia, also known as "the Great," over the Swedish forces under Field Marshal Carl Gustav Rehnskiöld, in one of the battles of the Great Northern War.

Tordenskjold i Dynekilen

The Danish-Norwegian flotilla ambushed the Swedish fleet while it was positioned in the harbour of Dynekilen. In the process, it overcame and destroyed a small island fort equipped with six 12-pounder guns positioned in the harbour entrance.

In 1718 Charles once more invaded Norway. With a main force of 40,000 men, he again laid siege to the fortress of Fredriksten overlooking the town of Fredrikshald. **Charles was shot in the head and killed during the siege**, while he was inspecting trenches. The invasion was abandoned, and Charles' body was returned to Sweden. A second force, under Carl Gustaf Armfeldt, marched against Trondheim with 10,000 men but was forced to retreat. In the march that ensued, many of the 5,800 remaining men perished in a severe winter storm.

Uniform worn by Karl XII in Frederikshall on 30 November 1718. Shown in The Royal Armoury in Stockholm.

Bringing Home the Body of Charles XII. A romanticized painting by Gustaf Cederström, 1884

Death

While in the trenches close to the perimeter of the fortress on 11 December (30 November Old Style), **1718,** Charles was **struck in the head by a projectile and killed.** The shot struck the left side of his skull and exited from the right. The shock of the impact caused the king to grasp his sword with his right hand, and cover the wound with his left hand, leaving his gloves covered in blood.
The definitive circumstances around Charles's death remain unclear. Despite multiple investigations of the battlefield, Charles's skull and his clothes, it is not known where and when he was hit, or whether the shot came from the ranks of the enemy or from his own men. There are several hypotheses as to how Charles died,

Charles never married and fathered no children of whom historians are aware. In his youth he was particularly encouraged to find a suitable spouse in order to secure the succession, but he would frequently avoid the subject of sex and marriage. Possible candidates included Princess Sophia Hedwig of Denmark and Princess Maria Elisabeth of Holstein-Gottorp

Exceptional for abstaining from alcohol and sex, he felt most comfortable during warfare. Contemporaries report of his seemingly inhuman tolerance for pain and his utter lack of emotion. His brilliant campaigning and startling victories brought his country to the pinnacle of her prestige and power, although the Great Northern War resulted in Sweden's defeat and the end of her empire within years of his own death

Carl XII's sarcophagus in Riddarholmen Church, Stockholm